

Fircroft College

Specialist designated institution

Inspection dates		28 April–1 May 2014
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good-2
	Previous inspection:	Outstanding-1
Outcomes for learners		Good-2
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment		Good-2
Effectiveness of leadership and management		Good-2

Summary of key findings for learners

This provider is good because:

- Success rates on all courses are high or very high.
- Learners develop excellent skills to prepare them for further study and for work.
- Progression is good for the large majority of learners.
- Teachers have very high expectations of what learners can do and achieve.
- Learners are highly motivated make positive changes to their lives through learning.
- Teachers, support workers and residential staff provide excellent care, guidance and support that help learners to achieve their goals.
- Teachers, especially on the access course, make particularly effective use of assignments and core study units to promote equalities, and to celebrate diversity and difference.
- Leaders and staff at all levels are highly committed to the college's mission of promoting social justice is outstanding.
- Self-assessment is rigorous, inclusive and accurate.
- The college's inclusive and supportive ethos for all learners, regardless of their previous background, creates a safe, diverse and inspirational learning environment.

This is not yet an outstanding provider because:

- Not enough teaching and learning are yet outstanding. The college's observation of teaching and learning process does not cover all aspects of the learner's journey and observers do not routinely carry out developmental observations to help teachers improve.
- On short courses, teachers do not always ensure that learning aims are specific to individual learners when planning learning. On the access course, teachers do not always plan learning sufficiently to challenge more able learners.
- Outcomes for learners aged 19 to 25 on the access course are not as high as those for more mature learners.
- Arrangements for providing written feedback to learners on short courses do not fully meet their needs.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that more teaching is outstanding by reviewing the observation of teaching and learning process so that it covers all aspects of the learners' experience. Implement a programme of developmental observation to help teachers improve further their classroom practice.
- Ensure learners' individual learning needs are fully met by setting learning aims on short courses that are individual and specific to each learner. Provide sufficient stretch and challenge for the more able learners on the access programme.
- Identify the reasons for the relatively weaker performance for access learners aged 19 to 25 and take effective actions to help them achieve as well as more mature learners.
- Provide written feedback to learners on short courses within timescales that help them to learn from the assessment of their work and improve their performance.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Good
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- Success rates on the college's short course programme, which generally consist of an intensive two and a half day residential, are very high. Learners make very rapid progress in a highly focused and dedicated learning environment. Learners make particularly good progress relative to their starting points. In a very short time, they develop good knowledge and understanding and an enthusiasm for learning.
- Success rates on the access to higher education course are high. The college is particularly effective in supporting learners, almost all of whom come from the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups in society, to succeed. The vast majority go on to university study on completion of the programme. Individual case studies show that the college successfully helps learners to overcome the very wide range of their barriers to learning. As a consequence, learners progress and achieve well.
- Though most learners do well, the college has correctly identified a few groups that tend to under-perform, such as learners on the access course aged 19 to 25. Managers have begun the process of identifying the reasons for the relatively weaker performance of this cohort of learners, but have yet to take effective actions to close this performance gap. Attendance has improved in the current year and is generally satisfactory, though it is below the college's ambitious target of 90%.
- The development of learners' personal, social and employability skills is outstanding, and is a significant factor in preparing them for further study and for the world of work. Learners also develop good skills in English and mathematics. Case studies record in moving detail the difficult journey that learners have made and the barriers they have overcome. Learners recovering from substance misuse, a history of offending behaviour and from mental health difficulties, develop increased confidence and self-belief. For many, the distance they have travelled on their journey is testament to the high quality care and support that the college provides.
- Progression from the college's short course programmes is good. A minority of learners go on to study further programmes or on to the access course. Learners on entry and level 1 short courses gain good skills which help them to take the first steps towards employment, for example, through community volunteering. Many learners who complete advanced short courses in fund raising, book keeping, counselling and management, work in the voluntary and

community sector and they develop useful skills to help them contribute to the success of their organisation.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Teaching, learning and assessment are good, as reflected in the high and very high success rates for most learners. Teachers have very high expectations of what learners can do and achieve. Previous failures in life or in learning are set aside and learners are encouraged to make a fresh start. As a consequence, learners focus clearly on making positive changes to their life and they take full advantage of the opportunities available to them at Fircroft to realise their goals.
- Teachers are dedicated to ensuring their learners succeed and they work tirelessly to transform the lives of every learner. They know their learners very well and provide high levels of individual support. Teachers motivate learners extremely effectively through lively and engaging teaching that enthuses them. A few staff are former learners of the college. They are positive and aspirational models for current learners.
- Learners, whose previous experience of formal education was poor, participate fully at Fircroft, show high levels of interest in their studies, and concentrate well. Teachers plan group work carefully to draw on learners' varying abilities, life experiences and interests, ensuring they develop their confidence and self-esteem. Learning resources are of a high standard and promote equality and diversity well through inclusive language and terminology.
- However, planning for individual learning requires improvement. The college acknowledges that better planning on the access to higher education course is necessary to provide sufficient challenge for the more able learners. On short course provision, learning aims are not specific to individual learners and teaching does not always build sufficiently on learners' existing skills and knowledge or develop their study skills.
- Learners produce work of a good standard. They develop great confidence in their own abilities and most make rapid progress in acquiring new skills and knowledge. For example, in public speaking and presentation skills, learners' presentations included bold use of colour and imaginative use of images and soundtracks to hold and maintain the target audience's interest. In a lesson on bid writing, learners developed their understanding of the key elements of a funding strategy and in groups produced a detailed funding application that met the high standards demanded in the voluntary and community sector.
- The assessment of learners' work on the access to higher education course is good. Detailed written feedback is a notable feature, providing learners with a constructive narrative with which to improve further. The development of learners' English and mathematics is good. Arrangements for written feedback on short courses require improvement. Learners wait too long for the return of their work and the benefits of the feedback are often lost as a result.
- Teachers, support workers, and residential staff provide outstanding support for learners, most of whom have multiple and complex barriers to learning. Staff carry out a thorough evaluation of each learner's capability and their life and work experiences before the course begins. Detailed group profiles identify potential personal barriers to study. Learners receive exceptionally good support to help manage financial difficulties, mental health problems, disability and learning difficulties. Transition arrangements into higher education for learners who have a criminal record are excellent. Adaptive technology and the adjustments made in lessons ensure that physical impediments do not hinder learners' enjoyment, learning and progress.
- The mission and ethos of social justice pervades all aspects of life at Fircroft. Learners rightly acknowledge and value the work of teachers and residential support staff; they speak positively of the impact that studying at the college has had on their lives and on their peers, family and

friends. On the access to higher education course, tolerance and respect for the individuality and intrinsic value of others is widely promoted through assignments and core units of study. Teachers skilfully promote and support class discussions about individual sensitivities, such as those related to sexuality, mental health and financial security. As a consequence, learners feel safe and well supported.

The effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
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- Leaders and managers have a very clear mission to promote social justice by providing an excellent learning environment for adult learners, almost all of whom have experienced educational and social disadvantage. The board of governors provides very effective leadership and direction. Board members have good expertise in different aspects of management, which they use well to review performance and to implement improvement actions. The board sets robust targets for success rates and attendance. Managers disseminate and monitor progress of these with teaching staff very effectively.
- The board has set up an effective strategic working group to provide clear leadership to plan the future direction of the college. It works very well with senior managers to review continually current performance and to plan a responsive and wide curriculum. Leaders and managers work well with the other specialist designated institutions, providing good support and sharing specific information and advice on funding and government policy relating to the sector.
- Managers use data very effectively to monitor rates of success, retention and attendance on individual courses, as well as for different groups of learners, to support curriculum planning and raise awareness of potential gaps in participation and achievement. They have successfully closed the performance gap between male and female learners, though a small gap exists in success rates for access learners aged 19 to 25; these learners perform slightly less well than older learners on the same programme. Participation for learners with disabilities is improving and is now high, with good facilities to meet their needs. Internal audits provide effective review of performance and practice.
- Managers have taken effective action to improve the quality of teaching and learning by implementing a more rigorous observation process. This now provides accurate judgements on teaching and learning, as well as highlighting areas for improvement. The college correctly judges the majority of lessons to be good, with a few requiring improvement. It has accurately identified key staff development needs, though it is too soon to judge the impact of training that has been subsequently carried out.
- Though observers grade lessons accurately, managers are over-reliant on the annual formal observation of each teacher. The observation process does not cover all aspects of learners' experiences such as induction, progress reviews and tutorials. Observers do not carry out developmental observations to help teachers improve further, nor do managers promote informal peer observations so that teachers can learn from each other.
- Self-assessment is a very rigorous and inclusive process; this includes good use of learner and staff feedback, as well as specific contributions from teaching staff and a thorough review and challenge from the board of governors. The self-assessment report is evaluative and provides detailed and accurate judgements. The quality improvement plan is effective in planning and reviewing progress against key indicators, but is too narrow overall, with insufficient focus on teaching, learning and assessment.
- Senior managers review the curriculum very effectively, closely monitoring course attendance to identify success or under-participation, and plan well to ensure that the college provides a good variety of courses to meet the needs of learners and partners. The college has good links with local partners and support groups, many of whom regularly refer clients to Fircroft College.

Partners also provide detailed feedback to college managers about additional courses to meet specific local requirements.

- The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Managers have an established policy of open access to courses, particularly to support learners from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Many learners are recovering from drug and alcohol misuse or have mental health difficulties. Staff have an inclusive and supportive ethos, regardless of learners' previous background. Policies and procedures for equality and diversity are clearly publicised throughout the college, along with positive displays put together by learners to promote understanding of cultural diversity, sexual orientation, and bullying and harassment. Learner focus groups are very effective in identifying how best to meet the needs of all learners.
- Fircroft College meets its statutory requirements for safeguarding learners. All staff receive regular training and have a good awareness of the importance of learners' welfare in a residential context. They know how to respond to any problems that arise. Learners have overnight access to residential staff should they have any concerns. They have confidence to share their personal experiences with staff, including instances that occur outside of the college. Staff have clear procedures for reporting and dealing with safeguarding issues, and good links with appropriate external agencies.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Fircroft College

<p>Inspection grades are based on a provider’s performance:</p> <p>1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires improvement 4: Inadequate</p>	Overall	19+ learning programmes
Overall effectiveness	2	2
Outcomes for learners	2	2
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	2	2
The effectiveness of leadership and management	2	2

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
Community Development	2

Provider details

Type of provider	Specialist designated institution							
Age range of learners	19+							
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	1,550							
Principal/CEO	Jonathan Skidmore (Acting Principal)							
Date of previous inspection	November 2007							
Website address	www.fircroft.ac.uk							
Provider information at the time of the inspection								
Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 and above	
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
	N/A	760	N/A	725	N/A	90	N/A	N/A
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A		
Number of traineeships	16-19		19+		Total			
	N/A		N/A		N/A			
Number of learners aged 14-16	N/A							
Full-time	N/A							
Part-time	N/A							
Number of community learners	N/A							
Number of employability learners	N/A							
Funding received from	Skills Funding Agency (SFA)							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ N/A. 							

Contextual information

Fircroft College, a registered charity, is one of four long-term adult residential colleges in England. The college mission is to promote social justice and offer seriously disadvantaged adults the opportunity to return to learning. The college delivers all of its provision from its base in Birmingham. It works with a number of partners, particularly with voluntary and community sector organisations and higher education institutes. Learners on the access course have suffered various disadvantages including drug/alcohol misuse or mental health problems and need intensive personal, housing and study support. Most learners on long courses and all learners on short courses are resident at the college. Fircroft College recruits learners locally and regionally. The West Midlands has one of the highest economic inactivity rates in the country. Birmingham in particular has a high unemployment rate and low employment rate. The West Midlands has the highest proportion of people aged 16 and over with no recognised qualification.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector

Jai Sharda HMI

Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one additional inspector, assisted by the director of academic development and programmes as nominee, carried out the inspection with short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors also used data on learners' achievements over the last three years to help them make judgements. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected throughout the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors looked at the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across all of the provision and graded the sector subject area listed in the report above.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement
Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Requires improvement
Grade 4	Inadequate

Detailed grade characteristics can be viewed in the *Handbook for the inspection of further education and skills 2012*, Part 2:

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/handbook-for-inspection-of-further-education-and-skills-september-2012>

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